

10-21-2016

To Come Out is to Uphold and Liberate: The Hegemony and Queerness of Christian Closets

Jon H. Omuro

University of Hawai'i at Mānoa

Follow this and additional works at: <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons>



Part of the [English Language and Literature Commons](#)

Recommended Citation

Omuro, Jon H. (2016) "To Come Out is to Uphold and Liberate: The Hegemony and Queerness of Christian Closets," *Mānoa Horizons*: Vol. 1 : Iss. 1 , Article 2.

Available at: <https://kahualike.manoa.hawaii.edu/horizons/vol1/iss1/2>

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by Kahualike. It has been accepted for inclusion in Mānoa Horizons by an authorized editor of Kahualike. For more information, please contact sheila.yeh@hawaii.edu.

To Come Out is to Uphold and Liberate

The Hegemony and Queerness of Christian Closets

JON H. OMURO

Senior Honors Thesis (English)

Mentor: Dr. Cynthia Franklin

In dominant LGBTQ+ U.S. discourse, the term “closet” refers to a space from which a covert sexual identification and/or orientation emerges. Yet, this definition becomes increasingly complicated when set in the context of evangelical Christianity. Indeed, within the U.S., dominant evangelical discourse is primarily viewed as antagonistic to LGBTQ+ peoples, due to its homophobic stances and denials of LGBTQ+ identities and rights. This opposition raises a key question: what do closet constructions situated at the intersection of gay/Christian identity look like? In this article, I explore and queer several Christian closets as structured by both gay and straight Christian writers. For these writers, faith and gayness play different roles of hiding, reinforcing, and liberating gay and Christian identities within and out of Christian closets. By scrutinizing these Christian closets within a queer framework provided by Eve Sedgwick and Judith Butler, I argue that these closets can be—often simultaneously—representative of the hegemonic demands of evangelical Christianity while espousing queer reimaginations of survival within this demanding ideology itself. Ultimately, I propose that Christian closets provide a unique venue through which overlaps, dissonances, and similarities between LGBTQ+/Christian ideologies and discourses can be affirmed, blurred, and queered. Such work is vital in the context of the present U.S., where these two ostensibly antithetical ideologies are continually thrown in the spotlight—both in expected quarrels or unusual displays of collaboration.

“The closet is the defining structure for gay oppression in this century.”

—EVE SEDGWICK, *Epistemology of the Closet*

Introduction

In my sophomore year of college, I came out—both brazenly and discreetly—in an online discussion thread that had broken out on my youth pastor’s Facebook Wall. My youth pastor, a theology student and avid supporter of LGBT rights, had gotten into an argument with one of his colleagues who adamantly claimed that gay and lesbian Christians were prohibited from ever marrying the same sex¹. My coming out was all at once a strategic deployment of pathetic rhetoric, a jarring interruption to the flow of Christian voices, and, admittedly, a heat of

¹ Here, and for the rest of the article, my discussions on Christianity are situated within the evangelical denomination of Christianity unless otherwise noted



This article comes from my larger honors thesis entitled “Queering the Gay/Christian Intersection: An Exploration of Celibacy, Ex-gay, and the Christian

Closet in Gay Christian Narratives.” I think of writing not as a work, but an active engagement—for myself, an active engagement with those who *be* at the intersection of queer/Christianity. Truly, these acts of being, in their contradictory nature, have the power to both buttress and un hinge oppressive heteronorms in American culture—while simultaneously suggesting alternative ways of living apart, in line with, and across said norms. Moving forward, I aim to continually launch myself into these engagements and to write responsibly and perversely about beings of contradictory survival.

the moment decision to show everyone that, in fact, gay Christians do exist; we are here, we are breathing, and we are struggling every day to stay afloat amidst the homophobic words like those flashing across my screen at that very moment. However, coming out as a gay Christian had its consequences. The personal messages I received from my friends, in addition to my already flagging faith, eventually led to my departure from my evangelical church. As I came out of the closet as a gay Christian, I decided to abandon my Christian identity.

My coming out experience, as well as those of countless other gay and lesbian Christians, show the intricate and contentious nature of closet constructions located in various areas of gay/Christian intersections. The complexity of these constructions, which I will henceforth call “Christian closets,” was revealed to me in the beginning stages of my research. When I googled “Christian closet” the first search result was “The Christian Closet,” a website created by Candice Czubernat, a lesbian Christian mental health counselor who aspires to provide counseling for LGBTQ peoples who also identify as Christians (Czubernat). Czubernat celebrates the coming out process in regards to LGBTQ sexualities and identities, with her slogan promoting the therapeutic service of “reconciling faith + LGBTQ² identities.” Five search results below Czubernat’s more progressive rendering of the Christian closet, another site caught my attention: a blog entitled “Coming out of the Christian Closet.” This site presents a completely different understanding of the Christian closet: coming out of the Christian closet does not entail the revelation of an LGBTQ sexuality/identity, but rather a renunciation of it, and a subsequent declaration of Christian faith. As the anonymous author writes, “I lived the gay lifestyle for ten years, and during that time, I was always afraid to tell people around me that I was a Christian. I lived in a ‘Christian closet’ where I chose to be purposely vague about my beliefs, because I thought it would be easier. Now I have chosen to live boldly for Christ, and it has given me unprecedented clarity about my past” (“Coming”). While this author’s personal story remains unfinished, it is clear from the website that he views the Christian closet and coming out as conjoined elements which bolstered his Christian faith, and he clearly rejects the popular definition of coming out as a declaration of LGBTQ+ identity.

2 The alternation between the terms LGBTQ and LGBT is due to Czubernat’s tendency to switch between them at different locations of her site

Bearing in mind such opposing and unique Christian closet constructions, I aim in this article to explore different manifestations of the closet, or, more specifically, the Christian closet, as constructed by authors writing from various positions of the gay/Christian intersection, specifically focusing on the following questions: (1) How are Christian closets constructed in these writings? (2) How do readings of these constructions reveal the hegemonic demands of evangelical Christianity while simultaneously commenting on the complex, difficult lives of queer Christians? (3) And finally, what queer reimaginations of the Christian closet can we garner from those who must contend with and navigate both queer and Christian aspects of their lived lives? Bearing such questions in mind, I begin this chapter with a preliminary exploration of some Christian closets, which I proceed to analyze under a queer framework provided by Eve Kosofsky Sedgwick and Judith Butler’s musings on closet constructions. With this framework in mind, I then turn the discussion to two contemporary gay Christian narratives: Wesley Hill’s *Washed and Waiting* (2010) and Chris and Angela Yuan’s *Out of a Far Country* (2011). Here, I highlight the ways these authors, one gay and the other straight³, construct, exit, are pushed into, and operate out of Christian closets. Ultimately, I remain concerned with the ways in which Christian closets uphold the hegemonic, heteronormative demands of evangelical Christianity, but am simultaneously invested in the ways these texts illustrate (sometimes unintentionally) fantastic, unique, and unimaginably queer Christian closets.

Christian Closets

To begin my discussion on Christian Closets, I first turn to writers outside of dominant LGBTQ+ studies, namely, Czubernat’s website, “The Christian Closet” (TCC). This site is clearly supportive of “coming out” in terms of LGBTQ+ identities and practices, and thus posits the Christian closet as a pernicious structure that must be overcome for the mental health of the subject. Approaching the topic from a mental health perspective, Czubernat explains that, in terms of her own life, “I grew up in a loving home, but the Christian roots did not provide any context, or support for me to struggle with the no-

3 While *Out of a Far Country* is written by both Chris and Angela Yuan, the specific excerpt I analyze in this article is written by Angela Yuan, who identifies as straight

tion of being gay. It took time, prayer, study, process and lots of support for me to come to the place I am today.” For Czubernat, gayness and Christianity represent two significant and personal realities—both of which can negatively influence one other. A key question, however, remains: for Czubernat, what does “coming out” exactly refer to? Based on the website’s “How can TCC Help Me” section, it seems to indicate explicitly the affirmation of LGBTQ identity. As Czubernat assures, “gay, straight, bisexual, lesbian or transgender, all of the above—we believe God still loves you. But we also know how hard it is to believe that when so many people say otherwise.” Czubernat’s audience, then, are Christians who must contend with an LGBTQ identity: those who navigate the tortuous, difficult existence of queer/Christian. From a queer lens, of course, the therapist’s sentiments are highly suspect. Here, queerness is not substantiated as a vital, necessary force of disruption and survival: rather, it is a liability that can be accommodated for in the ultimate pursuit of God. Although Czubernat remains complicit with anti-gay and hegemonic staples, her website nonetheless advertises a rare and progressive service amidst the chilling and prevalent prescription of anti-gay conversion therapy in the U.S.

While Czubernat’s site focuses on the struggles of LGBTQ youth, Ada Calhoun’s 2009 article “I am a closet Christian” deliberates over the costs of being an Episcopal Christian in liberal New York City. In this more progressive area, where identity markers shamed in larger western society are instead lauded, Calhoun argues that Christianity is vilified. As she explains, “To them [my friends], my situation is far more sinister: I am the bane of their youth, the boogeyman of their politics, the very thing they left their small towns to escape. I am a Christian” (Calhoun). At the same time, Calhoun’s Episcopal alignment puts her at odds with the anti-gay, right-wing policies and tenets of dominant evangelical Christianity. However, the moniker of Christianity is enough for her to stay closeted in fear of “sounding dumb, or like a zealot, or ridiculous.” Calhoun furthermore points out: “who wants to be lumped in with all the other Christians, especially the ones you see on TV protesting gay marriage, giving money to charlatans, and letting priests molest children?” For Calhoun, then, the Christian closet serves as a normalizing tool for social acceptance. By concealing her Christian identity, this Christian closet lets its owner avoid the so-called boogeyman accusations of progressive New York City. However, my decision to label New York as “progressive” as opposed to “anti-Christian” hints at

an important question: is it possible for a large community or city within America to be “anti-Christian?” This is a loaded question, of course—but my very asking reveals positions of power and privilege that mark Calhoun’s “Christian closet.” That Calhoun applies the term closet to her Christian faith, a term historically marked by persecution delivered in the name of Christianity itself, is questionable at best and irresponsible appropriation at worst.

Theorizing about the Closet

Given Czubernat and Calhoun’s conflicting, unique, and troubling Christian closets, I now turn to queer theory, which proposes understandings of the closet apart from any Christian conceptions. One such queer work, Eve Sedgwick’s *Epistemology of the Closet*, explores the epistemological structure of the closet and how subjects interact with it. In tandem with this article’s concern on different closet constructions, Sedgwick early on establishes that the complex interactions surrounding the closet—including what is “out” and “in”—are formulated and governed by what she calls “speech acts.” As Sedgwick poses, “the relations of the closet—the relations of the known and the unknown, the explicit and the inexplicit around homo/heterosexual definition—have the potential for being particularly revealing, in fact, about speech acts more generally” (3). But, as Sedgwick points out, the definition of a speech act is inherently problematic when the repressive, nullifying nature of the closet is considered.

To expound upon this conundrum, Sedgwick invokes Michel Foucault’s work on discourse in *The History of Sexuality, Volume 1: An Introduction*. Foucault offers insightful advice for thinking about how speech acts within closets can speak volumes about the very constructions of the closets themselves, and focuses particularly on various silences. He muses that “there is not one but many silences, and they are an integral part of the strategies that underlie and permeate discourses” (Foucault, qtd. in Sedgwick 3). Both explicit speech acts and silences, then, are indicative of closet structures that play a larger role in the proliferation of pervasive, oppressive discourses. In thinking about gay Christian narratives, multiple silences or more explicit speech acts within texts inform, elucidate, or replicate the discourses in which these authors function and survive. As I later argue in my analysis of Hill’s work, speech acts and

silences can reinforce and liberate Christian closets both hegemonic and queer.

While I find Sedgwick's explanations of speech acts and explicit silences valuable, I am more invested in her efforts to move the term "closet" beyond its definition within LGBTQ+ discourse as a mere structure of oppression. Towards this effort, Sedgwick establishes several "axioms" in the introduction of her work, established beliefs that guide her theorizations of the closet. The first of these axioms, "*Axiom 1: People are different from each other*" (22), is my primary focus here. This axiom may appear as common sense and fact—but, as Sedgwick reveals, much of western societal discourse gives little means for subjects to differentiate themselves from others. Rather, broad identity labels are proliferated by and within dominant U.S. discourse, by which subjects group themselves and others. Thus, people are left without room for personal, radical self-identifications and commonly fail to recognize others' intricate identifications and desires. Sedgwick laments this issue, claiming that "there is a large family of things *we know* and need to know about ourselves and each other with which we have, as far as I can see, so far created for ourselves almost no theoretical room to deal" (24). Sedgwick thus exposes an issue of regurgitation: there are a series of tried and encouraged inquiries by which *we should know*, and endeavor to know, about ourselves and others. To illustrate this conundrum, she lists a set of unassumed, chaotic assertions that chip away at commonly held beliefs and identity categories. For example, one simple statement reads: "even identical genital acts mean very different things to different people" (25). Sedgwick's point is that the tired and mindless repetition of generalizations so ingrained in dominant U.S. culture gives the illusion of differentiation without the acknowledgment of actual, lived lives set in completely different contexts.

Building on this idea, Sedgwick suggests in the chapter "Epistemology of the Closet" that interactions with the closet take place along a wide spectrum of experiences. Here, she offers the idea that "the gay closet is not a feature only of the lives of gay people. But for many gay people it is still the fundamental feature of social life; there can be few gay people, however courageous and forthright by habit, however fortunate in the support of their immediate communities, in whose lives the closet is not still a shaping presence" (68). By pointing out that, firstly, the closet does not exclusively apply to gay people, and that secondly, it still remains a phenomenal force even in the lives of those who are out, Sedgwick disrupts

the standard assumption that coming out of the closet is *the* goal to achieving sexual freedom. Rather, the closet remains a shaping, active influence in the lives of queer and queer/Christian lives.

Judith Butler's article "Gender and Imitation" further complicates the closet, and raises the inherently problematic act of coming out in terms of identity classifications. At the beginning of her article, Butler asks several thought-provoking questions which strike at the risks, vulnerabilities, and negotiations associated with coming out:

Is the 'subject' who is 'out' free of its subjection and finally in the clear? Or could it be that the subjection that subjectivates the gay or lesbian subject in some ways continues to oppress, or oppresses most insidiously, once 'outness' is claimed? What or who is it that is 'out,' made manifest and fully disclosed, when and if I reveal myself as lesbian? (308–309).

Butler's inquiries indicate a suspicion towards the demand to be out. To be out does not denote a wholesome bifurcation with the very systems of oppression. Rather, through a proclaimed traversing into the open, both the vulnerability of the out subject and the affirmation of the secret/known binary reinforces these oppressive systems, and, at the very worst, continue to oppress the subject.

Furthermore, Butler remains concerned that coming out can create phantom containers that oppress other subjects. She expresses this concern by stating, "if I claim to be a lesbian, I 'come out' only to produce a new and different 'closet'" (309). As Butler points out, the act of coming out not only exposes the self, but also creates a different space of identity (here, the out lesbian) which other subjects rub against, are excluded from, and compared to. In other words, coming out not only carries the danger of upholding oppressive systems reliant on identify labels, but can also throw into chaos the ontology and self-perception of other subjects. Butler's wariness of the closet stems from its impossible demand on queer peoples: the act of coming out facilitates a never-ending exchange and negotiation of identities, whether gendered, sexually oriented, or otherwise. For Butler, then, closets function as key structures of this endless reproduction. In the coming out process, closets come to signify, primarily, an integral identification that was once repressed but has now been revealed for the flourishing of its confessor. Yet, new and different closets might be formulated by separate subjects. Indeed, for others, burst closets can hold different significations: they represent what

identifications *should* be closeted, what identifications *deserve* to be revealed and publicized, and, indeed, what the normalized coming out process *looks like*.

Sedgwick and Butler's ponderings, which move the understanding of the closet and coming out beyond their often limited constructions, provide a critical queer lens through which to scrutinize Christian closet constructions. Butler's pointed questions, which galvanize thoughts on hegemonic closet spaces and coming outs, cast much suspicion on instances when these structures occur within evangelical Christian spaces themselves. For example, Czubernat's "TCC" website, while providing a progressive viewpoint, also raises questions on who coming out truly serves. Most notably, I remain hesitant with a certain accommodation she offers in addition to personal therapy: sessions with other individuals involved with the out subject. As Czubernat explains on her site, "The Christian Closet also holds sessions with straight family members, church leaders, and friends who are trying to work through what it means for someone special in their life to be 'out.'" While I agree that coming out engenders a substantial effect on the out subject's immediate relationships that might be addressed, the therapist also simplifies the LGBT coming out experience as a "gays vs. straights" conflict. Indeed, her insinuation that *straight* family members and church leaders are in need of LGBT rehabilitation lends to the normative narrative of "gay person comes out, straight community must learn to accept him." In differing contexts, however, coming out as LGBT can garner a variety of reactions, many of which are involved with closet constructions themselves: The church leader is himself a closeted gay man. The straight family member feels pressured to out himself as atheist.

In this vein, Calhoun's argument for a closeted Christianity can also be queered via Sedgwick and Butler. Sedgwick's arguments that different closets exist for different subjects and act as governing forces substantiate notions of a Christian closet which, due to New York City's liberalism, keeps Calhoun's Christian faith a secret. However, Butler's musings on closet replications are relevant here as well. As Calhoun exits one closet by coming out as a Christian in her article, her very writing itself constructs a different closet around atheists. In order to substantiate her argument that being Christian is, indeed, an identification that can be closeted, the author attacks atheism, and furthermore suggests that, in liberal areas, Christians are the ones persecuted by atheists. For example, by mentioning that several prolific atheists

such as Richard Dawkins and Sam Harris are "mocking the dummies gullible enough to believe some guy a couple thousand years ago was God's son," Calhoun suggests that dominant atheist rhetoric operates "like shooting Christian fish magnets in a barrel." For the author, then, atheism is the aggressor, and dispatching Christians as ignorant and ridiculous is its primary and easily obtainable goal. Ultimately, while Calhoun's arguments for a closeted Christianity are thought-provoking and sensitive to the damage that Christianity has done, her own liberation results in another closet construction: a closeted atheism. Indeed, in her zeal to argue for a valuable, closeted Christianity, she fails to acknowledge that atheism is also a vital and often closeted aspect of being.

The Closet in Hill's *Washed and Waiting*

Bearing in mind these queering of Christian closets, I now turn to Wesley Hill's *Washed and Waiting*, a gay Christian's theological memoir that blends personal narrative and theology to argue for gay Christian celibacy. Here, I focus on the chapter "Washed and Waiting," where the author shares his story of childhood into young adulthood. As a personal narrative, this chapter contains Hill's musings on closets and self-repression, and also describes moments of coming out. In approaching this text, I aim not only to explore closet themes within a gay/Christian context, but also reveal the larger, hegemonic forces that these themes ultimately uphold. I argue, then, that Hill's descriptions and experiences of coming out, in juxtaposition with Sedgwick and Butler's propositions of the closet, reflect and enforce the heteronormative standards of society. Furthermore, I argue that Hill operates within and out of a radical Christian closet which positions him at a problematic yet intersectional crossroads: on the one hand, he is an "out" gay, but on the other, he is a Christian who endorses celibacy of gays and homophobia of the church, thus upholding its hegemonic demands.

To foreground his personal narrative and descriptions of coming out, Hill reflects on his conception of the closet. Here, it must be noted that he never uses the term "closet" itself: instead, he describes the closeting of his sexuality in terms of repression and spiritual health. Due to a strict upbringing in Christian values, as well as being entrenched in the "conservative, fundamentalist Christian world of the Bible Belt" (30–31), the young adolescent engages in the violent stifling of sexual ex-

pression like so many other LGBTQ+ peoples. Hill writes poignantly in a chilling passage: “my strategy for coping with my condition was ignoring it, turning a blind eye to it, stuffing it deep into dark recesses of my consciousness and hoping that eventually it would be so deeply buried it would die for lack of exposure” (31). Significantly, even Hill’s decision to come out of the Christian closet is based within the realm of Christianity, specifically from a need to remain “spiritually healthy.” When his friend, Jenna, describes to Hill her journey through depression, Hill has an epiphany: “ignoring is not the path to redeeming” (34). For Hill, then, coming out is neither a queer process nor creed—instead, it is a Christian ritual with the sole intention of facing one’s deviant sexuality head on.

For Hill, then, the Christian closet is not a space that must be flung open for the flourishing of queer identity. Rather, it is a storehouse of shame that must be confronted for the sole purpose of faithful devotion. These points are further buttressed by Hill’s introduction, where he hopes that his book “may encourage other homosexual Christians to take the risky step of opening up their lives to others in the body of Christ. In so doing, they may find, as I have, by grace, that being known is spiritually healthier than remaining behind closed doors, that the light is better than the darkness” (17). Hill’s urgings to be “spiritually healthier,” as opposed to being in the “darkness” of the Christian closet, equates gay/lesbian desires to a diseased curse—a horrid and heavy secret that must be revealed and addressed for the sake of Christian faith. Furthermore, I argue that Hill’s formulation of the Christian closet as something to be overcome for the betterment of spiritual health, via a movement out of the immoral, the corrupt, and the dark, is indicative of the homophobia with which the institution of evangelical Christianity constructs the closet: a place of shame that must be kept secret or burst open for salvation. Coming out, then, is both a confession and commitment. It is an acknowledgment of guilt, a hoisting of sexual deviance, and a pledge towards God despite a debilitating burden.

While Hill describes several moments of coming out during his young adulthood, I focus here on his first coming out experience in order to tease out the theme of “spiritual healing” in conjunction with coming out in a gay/Christian context. Hill’s philosophy professor at Wheaton College (a liberal arts Christian school) is the first person to whom he outs himself. Notably, the professor’s first reaction is one of concern: “I want you to know that I will begin praying for you regularly, Wes” (36). Such a response is not surprising, given evangelical

Christianity’s preoccupation with homosexuality as sin. Here, I am reminded of the “love the homosexual hate the homosexuality” rhetoric, of the ostensibly progressive missives which might appear benign at a surface level but in reality replicate and enforce the hegemonic, oppressive erasure of queer peoples. While the professor’s intentions might be benign, his prescriptive reaction is indicative of dominant evangelical discourse’s heteronormative subjugations on Christian closets, viewing them as mere milestones on the path of heterosexual redemption.

More telling, however, are the comments made by a psychologist to whom the professor refers Hill. “Don’t be afraid to pursue multiple avenues for healing...God has used everything...to guide homosexual Christians toward wholeness,” he advises the young college student (38). The psychologist’s concerns with “healing” and “wholeness” recall Butler’s concerns with coming out: that the very act produces new and different containers of the self. Hill has, at great risk to himself, come out as gay, and immediately afterwards, he becomes interpellated as a broken Christian who must be healed. To be simply gay is unthinkable—no, Hill is an astray Christian with homosexual urges, struggling with temptations that “weren’t any more (or less) tragic than temptations to greed, pride, or anger that Christians face on a daily basis” (44). As Hill steps out as a gay Christian, then, he steps into another closet. As a tragic, gay Christian, Hill is expected to abstain from the “gay lifestyle,” effectively annulling his sexual urges and identification. The young man’s experience, while cast in a positive light by Hill himself, highlights the evangelical church’s problematic construction of the closet and coming out. Specifically, the act of coming out serves as a diagnosis for an urgent, but treatable condition: that of being a *gay* Christian, thereby cloistering a conception of gay identity within another closet. The subject who comes out must thus take on the role of the fallen, broken, and sinful Christian on the path to healing,

Intriguingly, a later coming out experience of Hill’s engenders a more positive, queer response. After his coming out experiences with his professor and psychologist, Hill reveals his gay identity to Charlie, a young, evangelical Christian friend and confidante of the author. While Charlie certainly contributes to the upholding of an anti-gay Christianity, having previously assisted in the rehabilitation of a man who “wrestled with homosexual inclinations” (46), his nonintrusive and reverent reaction to Hill’s confession holds much more promise than that of Hill’s professor and psychologist. As Hill writes,

“when I finished, Charlie was quiet...’Wes [he said], I just want you to know that I don’t think this is weird” (47). Of course, the word “weird” raises an eyebrow—a possible indication of homophobic repulse in reaction to queer expressions of sexuality. However, this word also triggers notions of non-normativity, dispelling the standard, heteronormative demands of evangelical Christianity that are so intent on insisting that homosexuality does not even exist. All at once, “weird” is an acknowledgement of distasteful and uncomfortable transgression, yet it is this very acknowledgement and discomfort that marks Charlie’s response as queer.

In addition, Charlie uses a particular word, “sacred,” to indicate a certain non-normative and even disruptive power that Hill’s coming out holds. As he tells Hill: “what did I do to deserve to listen to a—like, a sacred trust like this, you know?” (47). The word “sacred” is significant here, and can be read as aligning with Jennifer Harvey’s use of the term in her article “Disrupting the Normal: Queer Family Life as Sacred Work.” In this work, Harvey explains that sacredness combats “sin, [which] choos[es] inappropriate postures relative to the disciplinary regimes of power through which human subjectivity is formed” (106). In other words, sacred refers to that work done outside of heteronormative, institutionalized power structures imposed by secular, human notions of hierarchy. While I would doubt that Charlie uses this term explicitly in the manner that Harvey does, his labeling of Hill’s outing as “sacred” is remarkable nonetheless, denoting a sense of respect and power to the young man’s act of vulnerability that contests the oppressive and encroaching ideology of evangelical Christianity. On the other hand, to call this moment completely queer would be fallacious, and it must be acknowledged that the very moniker of “sacred” is itself an act of interpellation: a motion that brings the queer into the language of religion.

While I have examined moments of the closet and coming out to discuss how Hill’s work constructs one conception of a Christian closet, I would be remiss to ignore the ways in which a multitude of silences also inform this epistemological structure. Of course, the entirety of *Washed and Waiting* could be argued as a mass of gaping silences. This text, via its espousal of celibacy and reciprocal lack of support regarding LGBTQ+ issues, is representative of a Christian closet that claims gay outness but simultaneously reinforces the pillars of a homophobic institution. An example of a more explicit silence occurs near the end of Hill’s work. The author describes a conference he holds with another professor,

in which the two men discuss the plight of a lesbian woman struggling with loneliness. In advising Hill about his own sexual desires, the professor speaks to him as if talking to the lesbian woman: “you need to be resocialized into the human community of the church. Your desire for sexual relationships with other women needs to be transformed, so that nonsexual relationships with men and women...become lifegiving to you” (110–111). The homophobia and callousness in these statements is strikingly apparent. The term “resocialized” once again implies a pathology, a cure for a being so despicable it becomes outcast from society. In addition, the idea of abstinence becoming “lifegiving” is egregiously insensitive to the needs, desires, and hopes of gay/lesbian subjects. And yet, Hill fails to address such concerns, and rather than challenging these homophobic comments, views the professor’s words as a “new paradigm” which further informs his theological doctrine of gay celibacy. In doing so, Hill becomes complicit with the hegemonic, homophobic institution of evangelical Christianity, which seeks to stamp out any deviant queerness that challenges its inherent heteronormativity.

Prayer Closets in Chris and Angela Yuan’s *Out of a Far Country*

Moving from Hill’s complex Christian closet constructions both problematic and queer, I direct my attention towards another unusual Christian closet: prayer closets. Chris and Angela Yuan’s *Out of a Far Country*, another gay Christian narrative, follows the story of Chris, a young, gay dental student and son of Chinese immigrants. The narrative begins with Chris’s coming out, and gradually traces his journey from profligate gay son to righteous pastor of Christ. While Chris’s own coming out and eventual straight conversion provides yet another example of repressive Christian closets, I am more interested here in Chris’ mother, Angela, who converts to Christianity in the wake of her son’s coming out. After her husband falls into a cantankerous anti-religious stupor, Angela finds solace in constructing a prayer closet, an area separate from the turmoil of daily life. She describes this space as “my sanctuary...this small haven in my own home” (Yuan 43). The closet quickly becomes part of Angela’s daily routine, providing her with “enough strength to get through [every] day” (43). Parallel to the ways in which LGBTQ+ closets can function as safe spaces of secrecy and survival, the prayer closet, as a sacred space of devo-

tion, helps Angela contend with being the only Christian in her family.

While the very idea of Christianity needing to find a safe space within U.S. society is, I argue, ignorant of the struggles of those who have been persecuted by Christianity itself, Angela's conception of the Christian closet is nonetheless intriguing in its proposition of faith-based closets. When Dee, one of Angela's Christian friends, comes over to visit, Angela brings her into the prayer closet, revealing to her an impressive arsenal of weaponry ranging from "multicolored pens and highlighters in a pen holder next to the Bibles" and "sticky notes with different prayer requests cover[ing] the tiled walls" (43). Angela's enthusiasm in assimilating her ally into a shared experience of Christian isolation is enlightening, and galvanizes further thoughts regarding Christian closets. Can there truly be a western conception of a Christian closet that is purely focused on a meditative isolation and subsequent bolstering of Christian faith? Although my current research suggests that such an idea becomes moot considering the rampant church-based homophobia plaguing LGBTQ+ peoples in the U.S, this is certainly a question and direction I am interested in pursuing for future research.

In terms of this project, prayer closets illustrate how queer, Christian, and intersectional queer/Christian closet constructions can converse upon shared experiences of secrecy and solidarity while simultaneously rubbing against each other. While Angela's prayer closet, much like queer closets, serves as a private place where an essential self-identification can find solace, it contrasts sharply to the contextual deployment of queer closets, which can be essential for queer peoples' very survival. Such tensions, overlaps, and contrasts at the intersection of queerness/Christianity mark the Christian closet as a highly troubled term—one whose queerness can vacillate enormously depending on its contextual deployment.

Conclusion

I have argued in this article that Hill's *Washed and Waiting* lends to the construction of a Christian closet from which he claims outness but simultaneously upholds the hegemonic, homophobic demands of the evangelical church. To produce a narrative text that espouses the stifling of gay desire via Christian doctrine is, of course, troubling. Yet, equally problematic would be to leave the discussion at that. I return to Eve Sedgwick's previous musings on

closets—that many individuals, despite being "out," remain influenced and shaped by the closet. Glimpses of the closet and coming out in *Washed and Waiting* are indicative of Hill's precarious situation. While he proclaims an out identity as a gay Christian, it is ultimately the church institution that retains dominant power, pushing Hill into the Christian closet from which he is pressured and encouraged to advocate for oppressive self-practices (such as celibacy). Simultaneously, Hill's position between LGBTQ+/Christianity communities marks him as valuable, posting him at an uncommon podium from which he can reinforce the evangelical church's hegemonic demands of LGBTQ+ peoples onto specific audiences, whether they be LGBTQ+ peoples suspicious of Christianity or heterosexual Christians seeking affirmation of anti-gay stances. My goal throughout this work, then, has been to criticize and affirm not only the subjects who produce texts at the intersection of queerness/Christianity, but also expose the larger controlling structures which govern their very speech and performative acts.

On the other hand, Christian closets structured by queer/Christian writers provide clandestine and unapparent perforations through which queerness infiltrates and muddles the seemingly unshakable homophobia of dominant evangelism. Hill's unusual interactions with Charlie, in addition to Angela's prayer closet, disrupt any singular definition of the Christian closet within Christian discourse. Charlie's reaction brings to mind the uncomfortable, difficult, even perhaps icky nature of coming out as gay within Christianity, and reverses the coming out of Hill within this context. In contrast to Hill's own postulation of the Christian closet as a marker of shame, Charlie suggests that Christian coming outs can be held sacred and even celebrated. Likewise, Angela's prayer closet removes the closet from its dominant axiomatic purpose of containing LGBTQ+ identities, and stimulates discussion surrounding the intersection of queerness/Christianity in terms of secrecy, survival, and community.

Writing this article has revealed to me the high stakes involved with the inescapable, but necessary, practice of scrutinizing closet structures in the queerness/Christian intersection. As I, along with other queer scholars, move forward into a new cultural era where the lines between queerness/Christianity are becoming more blurred, my hope is that we remain sensitive but critical to how the texts of LGBTQ+ Christian peoples are produced in tandem with the closet structures that determine their very existences and survival. In the end, however, the most

work lies upon these individuals themselves: to recognize and find alternative paths out of the replicating, inundating forces which govern their identities, thus putting into

question and chaos the structures that make gay Christian life so unlivable.

Works Cited

- Author unknown. *Coming out of the Christian Closet*. Wordpress.com, n.d. 1 Mar 2013, Web. 25 Oct 2015.
- Butler, Judith. "Imitation and Gender Insubordination." *The Lesbian and Gay Studies Reader*. Henry Abelove, Michèle Aina Barale, and David M. Halperin. New York and London: Routledge, 1993. 307–320. Electronic.
- Calhoun, Ada. "I am a closet Christian." *Salon*. Salon Media Group, Inc., 21 Dec 2009. Web. 25 Oct 2015.
- Czubernat, Candice. *The Christian Closet*. The Christian Closet, n.d. Web. 25 Oct 2015.
- Harvey, Jennifer. "Disrupting the Normal: Queer Family Life as Sacred Work." Larrimore, Mark, Michael F. Pettinger, and Kathleen T. Talvacchia. *Queer Christianities*. New York: New York University Press, 2015. Print.
- Hill, Wesley. *Washed and Waiting: Reflections on Christian Faithfulness and Homosexuality*. Grand Rapids: Zondervan, 2010. Print.
- Sedgwick, Eve. *Epistemology of the Closet*. Berkeley and Lost Angeles: University of California Press, 1990. Print.
- Yuan, Christopher and Angela Yuan. *Out of a Far Country*. Colorado Springs: WaterBrook Press, 2011. Print.